

BEGUM ROKEYA DAY

God gives, man robs

ROKEYA SAKHAWAT HOSSAIN

THERE is a saying, "Man proposes, God disposes," but my bitter experience shows that God gives, Man Robs. That is, Allah has made no distinction in the general life of male and female - both are equally bound to seek food, drink, sleep, etc. necessary for animal life. Islam also teaches that male and female are equally bound to say their daily prayers five times, and so on.

Our great Prophet has said "Talibul Ilm farizatu 'ala kulli Muslimeen-o-Muslimat", (i.e. it is the bounden duty of all Muslim males and females to acquire knowledge). But our brothers will not give us our proper share in education. About sixty years ago, they were opposed to the study of English even for males; now they are reaping the harvest to their bitter experience. In India almost all the doors to wealth, health, and wisdom are shut against Muslims on the plea of inefficiency. Some papers conducted by Muslims may or may not admit this-- but fact is fact-- the inefficiency exists and stares us in the face! Let me also venture to say that it is so; for children born of well-educated mothers must necessarily be superior to Muslim children, who are born of illiterate and foolish mothers. The late Lady Shamsul

Huda by way of conversation often used to say that the Muslim public abused her husband because he had given certain high posts to Hindus ignoring Muslim claims, but they failed to see their own fault that such and such Muslim gentlemen were really unfit for the posts.

It is an irony of fate that the Hindus, who are bound by their cartload of *Shastras* to treat women like slaves and cattle and to get their daughters married before they are hardly above their girlhood, i.e., within ten years of age, are, as a matter of fact, allowing the greatest liberty to their womenfolk and giving them high education. They are trying to get laws passed against child-marriage raising the age to sixteen years though their Pandits are loud in proclaiming the attempt as "unworthy of a Hindu"; and they are devising means to popularize widow-marriage, heedless of their Pandits, who quote *Shastras* saying "not only should a woman refrain from marrying a second time but she should reduce her body by living only on fruits, roots, flowers, etc. after her husband's death".

On the other hand, while Islam allows every freedom to women (so much so that a woman cannot be given in marriage without her consent of free will, which indirectly prohibits child-

marriage) we see people giving away their daughters in marriage at tender ages or giving them in marriage without their consent. Many a time a bride bitterly bewails her fate on being compelled to marry a bridegroom whom she knows to be a drunkard or an old man of sixty, but the marriage celebration proceeds despite her silent protest. And so-called respectable families in our society take pride in preventing widow-marriage, no matter whether the widow be a girl or thirteen or a child of sever years of age!

The worst crime which our brothers commit against us is to deprive us of education. There is always some grandfather or elderly uncle who stands in the way of any poor girl who might wish to be educated. From experience we find that mothers are generally willing to educate their girls, but they are quite helpless when their husbands and other male relations will not hear of girls attending school. May we challenge such grandfathers, fathers or uncles to show the authority on which they prevent their girls from acquiring education? Can they quote from the holy Quran or Hadis any injunction prohibiting women from obtaining knowledge?

We know there are Mussalmans of advanced ideas who are anxious to give their daughters a good education, but for



want of a suitable High School for Muslim girls they cannot have their wishes fulfilled, and so they groan under the wretched social system. Why cannot the public of Calcutta support one ideal school for Muslim girls? Such a High English School with boarding accommodation and hostel, which can supply the demands of all the different classes of people, high and low, is very badly needed in Calcutta. On our part we are willing to convert this School (we mean the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School) to that ideal one, provided we get public support and money enough to meet the cost of up keep.

This article was first published in *The Mussalman* on February 10, 1911.

We have taken this article from the book titled "The Mussalman Patrikal Rokeya Proshanga" edited and compiled by Dr. Laila Zaman and published by Bangla Academy.

The Secluded Women

Oborodh Bashini (The Secluded Women), published in 1931, is a feisty critique of extreme forms of purdah imposed upon women. It consists of 47 brief accounts of women's lives, two of which we publish here, along with an introduction by Begum Rokeya.

ROKEYA SAKHAWAT HOSSAIN

FOR a long time, we have been accustomed to seclusion, so there is not much that we -- especially I myself -- can say against it. If a fisherwoman is asked: "Is the smell of rotten fish good or bad?" what can her answer be?

I am here presenting a few personal accounts of our lives for my sisters -- I hope they will like them.

It must be mentioned here that in all of India the seclusion of women is [observed] not only from men, but also from women. Unmarried girls are not allowed to be seen by any woman except her close female relatives and maid.

Even married women observe *purdah* in front of women who are gypsies, magicians, entertainers etc. The more a woman can observe *purdah* and hide in a corner like an owl, the more virtuous she is.

Urban *bibis*, too, run away and hide when they see missionary *mems*. A woman locks herself into her room even if she sees a saree-clad Christian or Bengali woman, let alone a *mem*.

The Secluded Women – 8

A fire broke out in a house. Thinking on her feet, the mistress, after putting all her jewellery in a box, rushed out of her room. But at the door, she saw a crowd of men attempting to put out the fire. Rather than face them, she went back into the room and hid under the bed, clutching her jewellery box. She burnt to death but did not appear in front of the men. Hail! The seclusion of noble women!

The Secluded Women – 13

Listen to today's incident (28th June, 1929). The father of a schoolgirl wrote a long-winded letter that, since the motor bus does not enter his lane, his daughter has to wear a *burqah* and return home with the *mama* (housemaid) on foot. Yesterday, a man, who was carrying a pot of tea in the lane, collided with Hira (the letter writer's daughter), spilling tea on her dress and ruining it. I gave the letter to one of our lady teachers and asked her to investigate the matter. After her return, what she said in Urdu can be translated as:

"Upon investigation, I learnt that Hira's *burqah* doesn't have eyes (*Hira ka burqah mein aakh nahi hai*). The other girls said that from the bus they used to see that the maid all but carried Hira in her lap. As the *burqah* had no eyehole, Hira could not walk properly -- the other day, she stepped on a cat, sometimes she trips. Yesterday it was Hira who bumped into the man carrying the tea and spilled it."*

Can you believe that Hira is only 9-years-old -- that this young girl has to wear a "blind *burqah*" to walk on the streets! If this is not done, apparently the sanctimony of seclusion is violated!

*Just now I happened to see a line in an article by Srimati Amina Khatun in the *Ashar* issue of "*Mashik Mohammadi*" (Monthly Mohammadi) -- "For some time if one goes about with one's nose, face and eyes closed (one is likely to stumble on a strange men) -- that is Islam's external *purdah*."

Translated by Sushmita S. Preetha, a journalist of *The Daily Star*.

The relevance of Rokeya's legacy

MD. MAHMUDUL HASAN

NO comprehensive research has thus far been undertaken to discover forgotten Muslim women writers of Bengal. As a result, most of the Bengal Muslim women writers of the past have remained shrouded in the mists of time. From among those who are better known and researched than others, one of the most prominent names is Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880 – 1932). Rokeya's literary career stretched three decades (1902 – 1932) and her works span all major literary genres. In terms of resilience and courage confronting oppressive patriarchal hegemony, overcoming the social and pseudo-religious barriers against women's right to education, and fighting against their legal disabilities, perhaps, Rokeya stands incomparable in the history of the women's liberation movement.

As part of her struggle for female education, Rokeya set up a successful institution. However, it was an uphill battle for Rokeya to found her Sakhawat Memorial

Girls' School and to convince parents of the need to send their daughters to the school. Sensing her compelling passion for female education, her forward-looking husband Sakhawat Hossain set aside Rs. 10,000 (a good sum of money at that time) for her to establish one.

Rokeya started educating girls in Bhagalpur in 1909. But she could not continue educational activities there for long, due to stiff social opposition compounded by the mistreatment she received from some of her in-laws after husband's demise. Eventually, she had to leave Bhagalpur and settle down in Calcutta where she started Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School in 1911 with eight students.

What makes Rokeya unparalleled among all those who fought for women's rights is her indomitable, unswerving courage and sustained activism against the established system. In order to create awareness among Muslim women she walked from door to door and organised them under the banner of Anjuman-i-Khawatin-i-Islam (Islamic Sisters Group). She did this at a time when women's

participation in such organisational or political work was unimaginable.

The cultural context in which Rokeya struggled for women's rights and educational opportunities is important. Negative attitude and hostility to female education on the basis of wrong interpretation of Islamic texts was overwhelming in the entire British India. The champion of Muslim educationist Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) understood the need for female education and women's empowerment. But he dared not advance female education fearing that such a move might thwart his entire education agenda.

In this respect, compared to all social reformers of the region, Rokeya was extremely courageous and refused to give in to the patriarchal power structure. She waged an all-out war against women's passivity, their incarceration in the domestic enclosure, lack of access to educational opportunities, restrictions placed on their role in public life, and against the legal and social discriminations against them.

In today's Bangladesh, one of the great-

est challenges for establishing women's rights now is to ensure women's security in domestic and outside spheres and to create a congenial atmosphere for them to realise their potentials and gain self-confidence. Rokeya helped women obtain education and become involved in public life. She broke the wall of domestic incarceration and brought women out of domestic confinement. But the need to challenge structural and systemic violence is not over. What is more, women of poor economic background have not had an equal share in the gender equality achieved so far.

In addressing gender-based violence and marginalisation in all spheres of life, imprudent denigration of cultural norms and religious beliefs and senseless imitation of alien values may not be helpful. Rokeya's strategy earned her support from both Muslims and non-Muslims, and from both religious and secular establishments. We should follow her wise and prudent strategy.

The writer is Associate Professor at International Islamic University Malaysia.

MUST READ FOR ALL MOTHERS ...



Adolescents and young people of Bangladesh

SUPPLEMENT DESK

Bangladesh has an adolescent and youth population of approximately 52 million, amounting to 1/3rd of the country's total population. This significant percentage, however, will not remain unchanged for very long and it is projected that by 2050, only 10-19% of Bangladesh's population will consist of young people (UNFPA 2014). What this means for a country like Bangladesh is that it needs to invest in the human capital of young people and focus on meeting their needs without further delay. It is only then the country will be able to reap the benefits of this investment by having a more educated, healthy and productive population during the second half of the century. Often referred to as the demographic dividend, what this means in simple terms is that investing in young people will contribute to economic growth, poverty reduction, falling fertility rates and better social indicators for the country.

The lack of access to high quality education, absence of decent work opportunities for youth, the unavailability of comprehensive health including sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services, the exclusion and marginalization from civic participation and policies and laws which act against the best interest of young people are but a few challenges which they have to contend with on a regular basis. In a context like Bangladesh, where socio-cultural beliefs, patriarchal norms, economic deprivation and difficulties in accessing quality information and services on sexual and reproductive health, directly affect young people, it becomes the responsibility of the development sector to advocate for greater investment in young people and support the Government of Bangladesh in their efforts to address issues which affect this cohort of the population.



PR Trainer Sabbir talking about SRHR to young members of a youth friendly service centre.

UNFPA, with its focus on ensuring that every young person's potential is fulfilled, has varied interventions to address adolescent and youth SRH needs in Bangladesh. In order to meet young people's overall SRH needs and make available accurate and affordable information and services which are not judgmental, UNFPA works with a range of partners in different settings. Three of the most pressing issues which affect young people in Bangladesh, in relation to their sexual and reproductive health and rights are gender based violence, child marriage and associated teenage pregnancy and fertility. According to the Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey (BDHS) of 2007, 35% of rural ever-married adolescents and 40% of urban ever-married adolescents have experienced some form of violence by their husbands in their current or most recent marriage. The Health Profile of Adolescents and Youth in Bangladesh published by the Government of Bangladesh, states that women aged 20-24 are more likely to have ever experienced physical violence than adolescent girls aged 15-19, indicating that older women have been exposed to the risk of violence for a longer time than younger women.

Closely linked to gender based

violence and the discrimination faced by adolescent girls is Child Marriage. Child Marriage is a serious concern for Bangladesh with 65% of women currently aged 20-24, being married by 18 years (BDHS 2011), a statistic that has remains unchanged from 1999. According to the International Centre for Research on Women (2012), the prevalence of child marriage in Bangladesh is the highest in South Asia and even though poverty is not the only contributing factor, it is one of the strongest drivers for this high level of child marriage. The societal pressure to prove one's fertility, almost immediately after marriage, has resulted in Bangladesh also having high levels of teenage pregnancy and fertility. The adolescent birth rate, for girls between the ages of 15 and 19 years is 118 per 1000 women which is again the highest rate in the South Asian region. The high level of child marriage and associated teenage pregnancy results in many negative health and social consequences which include obstetric fistula and other pregnancy related morbidities, maternal mortality, neo natal/infant mortality, anemia and poor overall health of both the baby and the mother.

In addition to working with key line Ministries and NGOs to

provide SRH services for young people, UNFPA also supports policy makers to integrate population dynamics in all planning efforts. Advocating and engaging with Parliamentarians to improve maternal health, eliminate child marriage and ensure young people's development is another area of UNFPA's work in Bangladesh. It is important to note that investing in meeting the SRH needs of adolescents and youth is but one aspect of ensuring their overall development. Whilst the sexual and reproductive health of young people is a key factor in their overall development, it is important to also invest in quality education for young people, including comprehensive sexuality education, decent employment opportunities which are free from gender based discrimination and violence and giving young people a platform to contribute to the formulation of long-term development plans. Young people have a right to quality education, decent work and comprehensive health services including sexual and reproductive health services and investing in young people is what will give hope to the next generation. It is this which should be the focus of all our development plans.

Adolescents and youth are a key focus for the UN and UNFPA – both globally and in Bangladesh. The recently presented UN Secretary General's Synthesis Report on the Post 2015 Development Agenda highlights and reaffirms UN's commitment to addressing youth issues and especially focuses on the importance of meeting the sexual and reproductive health and rights of adolescents and youth. As articulated by Mr. Ban Ki-Moon at the First Global Forum on Youth Policies in Azerbaijan, 'the leaders of tomorrow must be heard today' and we in Bangladesh need to pay close attention what Bangladesh youth are telling us and invest in their 'today' so that their 'tomorrow' is one which is more equal, just and fair for all, especially for young girls.

“The government should create a supportive policy” – Dr. Jahir Uddin Ahmed

Sohel Rana of *The Daily Star* had a heart to heart talk with Dr. Jahir Uddin Ahmed on the aspects of SRHR (Sexual & Reproductive Health & Rights), what does it mean and where do we stand today with regard to their realization by the target population. The excerpts are given below.

In response to the question, what is SRHR, Dr. Ahmed said that sexuality is the behavioral aspects of human beings; how the people behave about his or her feelings, emotions, choice, and freedom related to marriage, taking children after marriage, above all, freedom of choice. So these types of behaviors are known as sexuality.

"What is meant by Reproductive health?" In response he said, "It is defined as the health of the people which is known as physical, mental, psychological, social or spiritual wellbeing of human being. If these four words are properly maintained and followed we call it 'Reproductive Health'. Reproductive health again has 8 components: safe motherhood, family planning, maternal nutrition, adolescent reproductive health, infertility, neo-natal health, unsafe abortion, prevention or protection from diseases like HIV and other diseases. These rights must include the people who are disabled, marginalized, displaced due to natural calamities, wars, lack of works etc. Even the minority will enjoy these rights."

Is it possible for the adolescents to demand for the rights without knowing what their rights are?

Dr. Ahmed: "It's impossible. About 23% of the population are adolescents in our country. It is a huge number. They are the future leaders of our country. They must not be ignored in any way. They should be properly guided on these issues which are censored in our society. They should be made aware of their health as well as their rights. Experts should be assigned to train up these people from the Upazila level. In this regard, government should be forthcoming to solve these issues. It is important to inform you that sexual rights are human rights according to International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF). Sexual rights are constituted by a set of entitlements related to sexuality that emanate from the rights to freedom, equality, privacy, autonomy, integrity and dignity of all people. The ten

sexual rights are:

- Rights to equality, equal protection of the law and freedom from all forms of discrimination based on sex, sexuality or gender.
- The rights to participation for all persons, regardless of sex, sexuality or gender
- The rights to life, liberty, security of the person and bodily integrity



- Rights to privacy
- Rights to personal autonomy and recognition before the law
- Rights to freedom of thoughts, opinion and expression; rights to association
- Rights to health and to the benefits of scientific progress
- Rights to education and information
- Rights to choose whether or not to marry and to found and plan a family, and to decide whether or not, how and when, to have children

• Rights to accountability and redress

Another important issue is Sexual Rights: An IPPF Declaration provides a clear framework within which the Member Associations can understand their responsibilities as service providers. They will be better equipped to begin or extend their work on improving access to all, and thereby enable their clients to fully realize their sexual and reproductive rights.

What would be your suggestion, sir?

My suggestion is that the government should create an overall supportive policy and legal environment to promote adolescent reproductive health. Because the constitution of Bangladesh guarantees equal rights for men and women irrespective of caste, creed and colour. All citizens are entitled to equal protection under the law. Media can play a vital role in this regard by reporting on the happenings which are not lawful."

Dr. Jahir Uddin Ahmed is a physician. He is former DG, FPAB (IPPF), former Director, DGPF (MoHFW), former consultant USAID, EH and WHO.